DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 142 EA 026 847

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TITLE The Development of Best Practices Descriptors.
INSTITUTION New South Wales Dept. of School Education, Sydney (Australia).
PUB DATE Jan 94
NOTE 19p.; Paper prepared for the Annual Meeting of the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (7th, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, January 3-5, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Assessment; Educational Objectives; *Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; *Evaluation Criteria; Foreign Countries; Guidelines; Learning Processes; Learning Strategies; *School Effectiveness; Specifications; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Australia (New South Wales)

ABSTRACT

In April 1993, the Assistant Director-General of the quality-assurance review program in New South Wales, Australia, established guidelines, called "best practices descriptors," to provide schools with collaboratively developed statements that reflect the characteristics of an effective school or classroom. The statements will provide a framework for the evaluation of schools during the school-review process. This paper focuses on the development of the descriptor statements in the domain of teaching and learning, which were formulated during several meetings of the writing group for that domain. The group developed three major categories--the learning environment, student learning, and teaching practices--and next elicited feedback from teachers. During this school-consultation period, schools reported that they used the descriptor statements to debate the business of teaching and learning; to generate professional discussion; and to develop pointers of observable classroom practice. Widespread consultation with all stakeholder groups is scheduled for 1994. Appendices contain information on and a figure depicting experimental learning styles. (LMI)

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ED 384 142

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BEST PRACTICES DESCRIPTORS

Seventh International Congress for
School Effectiveness and Improvement
Melbourne 3-6 January, 1994

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF BEST PRACTICES DESCRIPTORS

THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

In April 1993, the Assistant Director-General (Quality Assurance) established Terms of Reference for the development of Best Practices Statements along the following lines:

"The Best Practice Committee is to establish Best Practice Working Parties to address domains of practice in schools. Each Working Party will be responsible for developing and recommending, in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, descriptors of best practice in a designated domain of practice.

Specifically each working party will be required to:

- provide a framework that encompasses the major areas of practice within the domain assigned to them
- define the aspects of practice that are to be the focus of review within each of the areas
- develop descriptive statements to indicate the characteristics of different levels of performance or differences in the status of facilities and activities relevant to each aspect[1]

LINKS WITH THE REVIEW PROCESS

The Primary Purpose of Best Practices Descriptor Statements

The primary purpose of best practices statements is to provide an agreed framework for the analysis and reporting of the operation of schools during school reviews.

Best Practices Descriptors will provide schools with collaboratively developed statements which reflect the characteristics of the operation of a highly effective school or classroom. Best Practices Statements are intended as a guide to the assessment of school effectiveness only.

Use of Best Practices Statements

The statements take into account that schools work in different contexts and move through stages of a life cycle. The gathering of

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[1] Best Practices Working Party, Terms of Reference, April 1993

information in school reviews will be sensitive to the context of each school. The statements provide a landscape against which the school community can test their strategic plan and negotiate the focus areas for their school review. They will form the backdrop against which a school's negotiated review focus areas will be reported.

The statements are not prescriptive or comprehensive descriptions of the way to implement best practices, rather they describe the key characteristics that one would expect to observe as the outcomes of the practice or function in effective teaching and learning situations or in support of the teaching and learning environment.

They are not intended to be exhaustive, nor is it expected that all of the characteristics described in the descriptor statements will be observable in any classroom or school in a particular time period.

They will not usurp the professional decision making role of teachers to make judgements about the way they undertake their work. In this context, the statements are high-inference indicators of the outcomes of the practice and functioning in schools across the system.[2]

ESTABLISHING A PROCESS

A state planning day was held in Sydney in April 1993 where some key procedural decisions were made. Perusal of the minutes of the meeting indicate that there was agreement reached that work would proceed using the terminology of "domain", "area", "aspects or practice" and "quality descriptors". Tentative domain labels agreed to were:

- **Teaching and Learning**
- **Leadership and Culture**
- **Management and Governance**

A writing party was established for each domain, chaired by a Director (Quality Assurance School Reviews) as coordinator with a Principal (Team Leader, Quality Assurance) as assistant coordinator. Each group was to work in an individual capacity to draft a document which would then be released. Consultation was to be wide and the material was to be drafted by acknowledged, outstanding classroom practitioners. The development of the descriptors was to reflect Department of School Education policies, and recent research especially in the effective schools area and the measurement area of school effectiveness.

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2 Draft Best Practices Foreword, Quality Assurance Directorate, December 1993

This paper focuses on the development of the descriptor statements in the domain of Teaching and Learning.

IDENTIFYING THE WRITING GROUP AND PRINCIPLES OF ADULT LEARNING

Careful thought was given to the composition of the writing group. In broad terms, the selection criteria were as follows:

- gender balance
- acknowledged widely as outstanding classroom practitioners
- acknowledged skills in written communication
- experience in the development of curriculum material
- access to a wide networking group
- K-12 with a representation from all levels in the teaching service
- wide credibility among peers
- strong work ethic and task orientation
- a 'track record' of achievement in getting things done
- recommendation from the Assistant Director-General

Approach was made through regional Assistant Directors-General. Some could not readily nominate a person to meet all criteria.

The convenor held a firm belief that the group should number around 10 which would allow for maximum group cohesion and the ability to form into smaller groups if necessary. There were obvious budgetary considerations.

As it turned out, six of the group had former experience in curriculum or focus area consultancy positions, one had been a professional assistant to an Assistant Director-General, each had a high profile with a professional association including the NSW Teachers' Federation, three had been in national research projects in classrooms, all had extensive post graduate training and all were nominated because of their superior classroom teaching practice.

Peter Honey and Alan Mumford (Management Development Specialists) have adapted Kolb's (1984) learning styles.[3] They use a four way classification that closely resembles that of Kolb but it is simplified for use in a practical training situation. (See Appendix One)

The group proved to be balanced in terms of Honey's and Mumford's descriptions. Group processes reflected Kolb's thinking in terms of

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[3] Kolb, D (1984) Experimental Learning, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey

THE KEY QUESTIONS GUIDING DEVELOPMENT

Although "the key questions" have now been refined, the process adopted by the group and used in some 98 teacher meetings remained the same.

1. If you had to define the major dimensions of any school operation, what would those 3 or 4 dimensions be?
2. In the dimension of Teaching and Learning, what do you believe are the major areas which define the teaching and learning operation?
3. Within these major areas, what do you believe are the main aspects that define what teachers and students do?
4. How would you describe observable classroom examples of best practices?
5. What pointers or indicators would suggest that best practices are a part of that school or classroom operation?

REFINING THE KEY ASPECTS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

BEST PRACTICES

At the Parramatta meeting of 20 May 1993 the group broke into two and brainstormed the range of Key Areas and identified aspects for each of the key areas. The process was one of "present" and "defend" - a process which was to form the constant questioning technique used in the remaining part of the year. The results of the day were as follows:

LEVEL 1 HEADINGS AND SUB HEADINGS

1. CURRICULUM PROVISION
   - BALANCE
   - PROCESSES
   - DECISION MAKING
   - PLANNING (MONITORING)
   - PROGRAMMING
   - EVALUATION
   - RESOURCES
   - EQUITY

2. LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

- VALUES
- ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY
- LIFE-LONG LEARNING
- STUDENT WELFARE
- CLIMATE
- RELATIONSHIPS
- PHYSICAL RESOURCES

3. TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

- PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
- SOUND PHILOSOPHY OF LEARNING
- UNDERSTANDING CURRICULUM THEORY
- TEACHER KNOWLEDGE
- COLLEGIAL RELATIONSHIPS

4. TEACHING PRACTICE

- PROCESSES
- ASSESSMENT AND REPORTING
- CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT
- ORGANISATION
- STRATEGIES

5. STUDENT LEARNING

- LEARNING STYLES
- INDIVIDUAL LEARNING NEEDS
- OUTCOMES
- WELFARE
- STRUCTURES FOR LEARNING

6. HOME/COMMUNITY/SCHOOL

- PARTICIPATION
- RELATIONSHIPS
- INTERACTION

All members of the writing group made a commitment to seek feedback from network groups and to run a staff meeting in a school before meeting again. Subgroups accepted the responsibility for further developing work in two areas prior to meeting again.

The second meeting of the group occurred at Salamander Bay (3-4 June 1993) where the Key Areas were refined in response to feedback from the network groups. Aspects and the Key Areas were modified as follows:

1. LEARNING ENVIRONMENT
   - 1.1 Social Context
   - 1.2 Physical Context
   - 1.3 Expectations
   - 1.4 Student Welfare
2. STUDENT LEARNING
   - 2.1 Student Attitudes
   - 2.2 Student Practice
   - 2.3 Reflection
3. TEACHING PRACTICE
   - 3.1 Teacher Beliefs and Knowledge
   - 3.2 Professional Training and Development
   - 3.3 Planning
   - 3.4 Implementation
   - 3.5 Reflection
4. CURRICULUM PROVISION
   - 4.1 Planning
   - 4.2 Implementation
   - 4.3 Resources

The group commenced the task of writing descriptors under each of the aspects especially in the area of student learning.

By the Gerringong meeting, 23-24 July 1993, the Teaching and Learning descriptors were further modified to three major headings in the light of feedback and the need for internal consistency in language and structure. The three headings have not been changed.

AREA	ASPECT
1. THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT	1.1 Social Context
	1.2 Physical Context
	1.3 Expectations

		1.4 Student Welfare
2.	STUDENT LEARNING	2.1 Student Attitudes 2.2 Student Practices 2.3 Reflection
3.	TEACHING PRACTICES	3.1 Teacher Beliefs and Knowledge 3.2 Professional Training and Development 3.3 Planning and Implementation 3.4 Assessment and Reporting 3.5 Reflection and Evaluation

During August and September, there was extensive consultation undertaken by the group with a view to identifying areas of overlap and providing the other writing parties with feedback in relation to style and terminology with a view to providing a common voice.

By late September, the writing group was developing a framework for data collection within the Quality Assurance school review process and collecting pointer statements from responder groups. The language had also been clarified:

What are the major dimensions of a school's operation?

Within these dimensions, what are the major areas of operation and what aspects define the scope of that area?

How would teachers describe best practices in that area and what pointers would indicate that best practices were a part of a particular school's operation?

OWNERSHIP, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND WIDENED UNDERSTANDINGS

The writing team developed a strong sense of ownership of the descriptor statements during the development process. They challenged and questioned each other and validated a stance by testing it against teacher perceptions through school staff meetings.

A bank of key words was kept as a reminder to focus group activities. A selection from that bank gives some insight into the philosophical stance underpinning the group's working: collaborative, interactive, active listening, negotiation, flexible, responsive, input, research-based, reflection, modifications, practical, output. Each found the process an

extremely rewarding professional development exercise. They "fed" off each other.

During the consultation period to date some schools have advised the working party that they have used the descriptor statements in the following ways:

- to debate the "business" of teaching and learning;
- to generate professional discussion;
- to develop pointers of observable classroom practices.

Many schools have contributed advice on the observable practices or pointers which indicate the application of the best practice descriptors. Pointers serve to identify the observable manifestation of the concepts embodied in each descriptor. A bank of pointers is being developed which will be accessible through an electronic bulletin board. The bulletin board is being managed by the students of Wyong Technology High School.

FACING REALITY OR TESTING THE VALIDITY OF THE DESCRIPTOR STATEMENTS

WITH THE PROFESSION

Reactions

Once the purpose of the descriptor statements was clarified - that they were primarily a framework to drive the school review process, teachers accepted the draft document as helpful.

Early responses included: "What's the hidden agenda?"; "Who is going to monitor this?"; "How will this be assessed without it becoming a checklist?". By the end of the year, after some 98 cluster or school meetings and 1660 individual responses, teachers were nodding their heads in approval. Comments of support included: "It's about time!"; "It's practical"; and "We can really use this to assist teachers".

Nature of the feedback

The nature of the feedback was varied, with cries from "Drop the jargon" and "Keep the concepts simple" to a call for more material on assessment and reporting for secondary teachers.

Other responses reflected the level of teacher understandings and served as a timely reminder that the business of marketing should never be based on the presumption that teachers share a common belief.

Example 1.

Student Learning Descriptor: Students utilise and adapt a variety of strategies to accomplish tasks.

Response:

Don't you mean Teacher? (We're primary) Children don't really consider what strategies they will opt for but rather the teacher provides what they believe to be the best method and then the teacher provides other strategies and variations for children who didn't "get it" the first time.

Example 2.

Student Learning Descriptor: Students are actively involved in setting goals and planning activities for their own learning.

Response:

You mean secondary. K-6??

Example 3.

Teaching Practice Descriptor: Teachers are committed to and have ownership of their professional development plans.

Response:

Nonsense.

Example 4.

Teaching Practice Descriptor: Teachers understand and apply the learning theories underpinning syllabus documents.

Response:

It is not necessary for teachers to understand the theories behind syllabus documents. We are employed merely to teach the syllabus. Teacher beliefs may be at odds with current theories. Teachers are employed to teach the syllabus.

One Cluster Director made a special call to say that it was the first time he has really seen the "cynics" engaged in talking and sharing ideas about teaching and learning.

Other comments and proposed pointers indicated solid knowledge about teaching and learning.

Example 5.

Student Learning Descriptor: Students collaboratively engage in making decisions about their own learning.

Response:

Pointers would include -

- A program of teaching through collaborative groups is followed
- Frequent opportunities to work in collaborative groups
- Students confident about working in groups
- Students supportive of each other
- Students value each other's ideas
- Group work displayed around the classroom

  Peer support, buddy classes, SRC, School Parliament, and other activities involve students across the school

  Lessons involve options for joint decision making.

WITH THE RESEARCH

These descriptor statements were developed after consideration of current Department of School Education policies, from a review of current literature on effective classroom teaching and school organisation and from an examination of the practical experiences of working party members.

1994 is scheduled as a year of wide consultation in school reviews and among all stakeholder groups including the tertiary sector.

THE GAPS - EARLY DAYS BUT POWERFUL QUESTIONS

The writing group took a decision early in the piece to develop pointers of classroom observable practice in the area of student learning. Such a decision was based on the premise that teachers would find this a less threatening exercise than discussions with regard to teaching practice.

As the writing team worked with teacher groups, they found that many teachers found it difficult to talk in terms of student learning. Our consultative process indicates that teachers do not think in terms of what students do. Rather, it suggest that teachers think in terms of input - in terms of what teachers do!

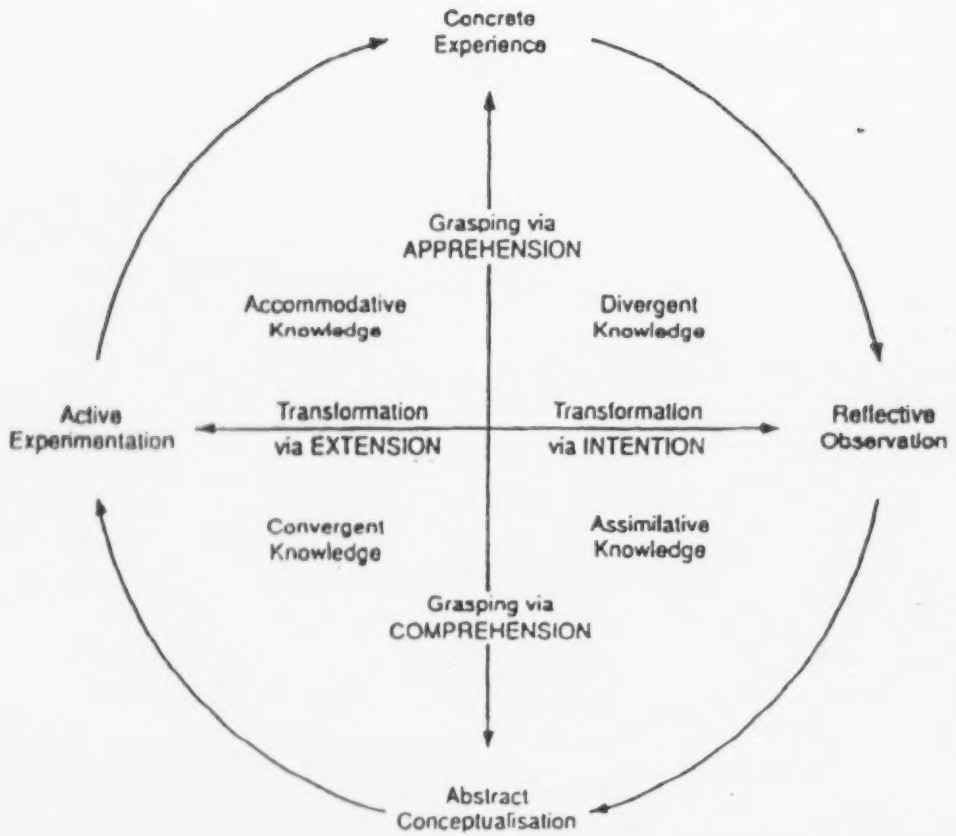
Other areas where teachers are currently finding difficulties developing pointers are listed below. Does this suggest that this is where the "gaps" are in teacher training and development?

- Students share in the assessment process
- Teacher beliefs and knowledge
- Teacher planning and implementation
- Assessment and reporting
- Reflection and evaluation

1994 AND BEYOND

1994 will be a year of wide consultation. Information will be collected during school reviews and the descriptor statements will be trialed during Terms 1&2. The training of Quality Assurance staff poses a particular challenge in terms of classroom analysis of teaching and learning. A further challenge is to develop such system information using the best of information technology.

Structural Dimensions Underlying the Process of Experimental Learning and the Resulting Basic Knowledge Forms



Source: Kolb,D (1984) Experiential Learning, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey

Kolb's learning styles have been adapted by two management development specialists, Peter Honey and Alan Mumford. They use a four way classification that closely resembles that of Kolb but is simplified for use in a practical training situation.

Learning Styles - General Descriptions

Activists

Activists involve themselves fully and without bias in new experiences. They enjoy the here and now and are happy to be dominated by immediate experiences. They are open-minded, not sceptical, and this tends to make them enthusiastic about anything new. Their philosophy is 'I'll try anything once'. They tend to act first and consider the consequences afterwards. Their days are filled with activity. They tackle problems by brainstorming. As soon as the excitement from one activity has died down they are busy looking for the next. They tend to thrive on the challenge of new experiences but are bored with implementation and longer term consolidation. They are gregarious people constantly involving themselves with others but, in doing so, they seek to centre all activities around themselves.

Reflectors

Reflectors like to stand back and ponder experiences and observe them from many different perspectives. They collect data, both first hand and from others, and prefer to think about it thoroughly before coming to any conclusion. The thorough collection and analysis of data about experiences and events is what counts so they tend to postpone reaching definitive conclusions for as long as possible. Their philosophy is to be cautious. They are thoughtful people who like to consider all possible angles and implications before making a move. They prefer to take a back seat in meetings and discussions. They enjoy observing other people in action. They listen to others and get the drift of the discussion before making their own points. They tend to adopt a low profile and have a slightly distant, tolerant unruffled air about them. When they act it is part of a wide picture which includes the past as well as the present and others' observations as well as their own.

Theorists

Theorists adapt and integrate observations into complex but logically sound theories. They think problems through in a vertical, step by step, logical way. They assimilate disparate facts into coherent theories. They tend to be perfectionists who won't rest easy until things are tidy and into a rational scheme. They like to analyse and synthesise. They are keen on basic assumptions, principles, theories, models and systems thinking. Their philosophy prizes rationality and logic. 'If it's logical it's good'. Questions they frequently ask are: 'Does it make sense?' 'How does this fit with that?' 'What are the basic assumptions?' They tend to be detached, analytical and dedicated to rational objectivity rather than anything subjective or ambiguous. Their approach to problems is consistently logical. This is their 'mental set' and they rigidly reject anything that doesn't fit with it. They prefer to maximise certainty and feel uncomfortable with subjective judgements, lateral thinking and anything flippant.

Pragmatists

Pragmatists are keen on trying out ideas, theories and techniques to see if they work in practice. They positively search out new ideas and take the first opportunity to experiment with applications. They are the sort of people who return from management courses brimming with new ideas that they want to try out in practice. They like to get on with things and act quickly and confidently on ideas that attract them. They tend to be impatient with ruminating and open-ended discussions. They are essentially practical, down to earth people who like making practical decisions and solving problems. They respond to problems and opportunities 'as a challenge'. Their philosophy is: 'There is always a better way' and 'If it works it's good'.

There are a number of forces that Kolb identifies which predispose individuals to adopt one or other of the learning styles. These include the basic personality of the individual, their educational history, their professional career, their current job role and the specific, immediate task that the individual is working on. Thus, the balance of these forces may act to shift individuals between learning styles but the importance of previous choices in terms of education, career etc will tend to lock individuals into one of the four learning styles most of the time with a consequent distortion in their ability to function throughout the full range of the learning cycle.

Kolb's work has been criticised, but his writing remains the clearest exposition of the concept of experimental learning which forms one of the major themes in the body of adult learning literature.

Conclusions

The adult learning literature is not propounding new theories of learning. Their concern is instructional; improving the way in which people learn by improving teaching. A number of common themes emerge:

1. The role of the self. The focus of attention is on the individual learning. The individual learner is self-directing and the process of learning is the growth of the self.
2. Experience. Learners draw on their fund of experience and learn through experience. Thus, the best instructional design must incorporate experiences which the learner undergoes in a self-directed manner.
3. Facilitation. The role of the teacher needs to change to accommodate the emphasis on self and experience for adult learners.

HOW PEOPLE LEARN

Conclusion One

Information must be presented visually, auditory and physically to ensure all primary learning styles are covered.

Conclusion Two

. SInce emotions and long term memory are inter-connected, learning will take place effectively when information is conveyed in ways that engage strong emotions.

Conclusion Three

People's state of mind determines how well they learn. Learning is strongly inhibited by stress. It is facilitated by a low stress environment, a state of relaxed alertness and a sense of confidence in one's capacity.

Conclusion Four

Effective learning in an average group is enhanced if the global picture is presented first. People learn effectively when information is presented so that the whole brain is fully involved and focused on the task.

Conclusion Five

Ensuring emotional content to learning actually makes our brains function better physically. It helps the transfer of information to long term memory.

Conclusion Six

Involving the learners' full range of (seven) intelligences enables all thinking and processing styles to be reached, and much deeper learning to occur.

Conclusion Seven

You need to find a way to let learners put any distracting inner speech to one side.

Conclusion Eight

A key factor in any long term change is to help the learner create a vivid, realistic and compelling vision of him/herself as she/he wants to be.

Conclusion Nine

Let the learners learn by doing and then reflecting on their own actions - especially in small groups.

Conclusion Ten

Consolidation in the long term memory needs a specific rehearsal strategy.

Conclusion Eleven

Improved self image must often precede learning and improved job performance. Desired behaviour needs to be continuously rewarded. Learning does not end in the classroom.

Conclusion Twelve

Learners benefit from a concrete, long term method of reinforcing the skills learned in the training sessions. That method needs to be a habit of specific self review. A successful medium is the Personal Progress Plan.